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SCOLMA conference “The Real Story? Personal Papers, Life Histories and Africa”

Towards the epistolarium: issues in researching and publishing the Olive Schreiner letters

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Introduction

The Olive Schreiner Letters Project (OSLP) is making use of ‘personal papers’ associated with, amongst a number of other important concerns, the history of Southern Africa, and doing so in an innovative way.¹ The OSLP is transcribing and analysing all of the extant letters of the feminist, social theorist and writer Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), and will contribute theoretically and methodologically to the use of letters and other epistolary materials in social science and humanities research. In addition, the project will publish in digital format transcripts of the complete Schreiner letters, which will be free access. The project is funded by the ESRC (RES-062-23-1286), and is multi-site, led by principal investigator Prof Liz Stanley, and with research and technical teams based at the universities of Edinburgh, Leeds Metropolitan and Sheffield.

Significance of the project

The OSLP is one the largest qualitative projects funded in the UK, and also one of the biggest sociologically-orientated projects to make use of letters on a very large scale since Thomas and Znaniecki’s pioneering study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* in 1920. The

¹ See www.oliveschreinerletters.ed.ac.uk for frequently updated information about the Olive Schreiner Letters Project. Publications so far associated with the Project include Stanley 2004, 2002a, 2002b; Stanley and Salter 2009; Stanley and Dampier 2010, 2008; Stanley, Dampier and Salter 2010; Poustie 2010.

project is a multi-disciplinary, drawing on aspects of social history, literary studies, social geography but within a sociological framework and combining this with the use of software technologies in our analysis.

The project has several areas of focus: the research project itself, involving detailed analysis of Schreiner's letters, preparation of 'the complete Olive Schreiner Letters' for electronic publication, as well as knowledge transfer around the user interface for a range of international users, and also via a series of Virtual Research Environment (VRE) workshops. These areas are explored below, after a brief contextualisation of Schreiner and the importance of her letters.

Significance of Schreiner's letters

Crucially, Schreiner's letters open up and allow for a radical rethinking of the social history of late 19th and early 20th century Britain and South Africa, and do so in a number of ways. Firstly, Schreiner's letters provide insightful and often startlingly prescient social and political commentary and analysis on the events and changes that took place over the period of her epistolary life (from the early 1870s until 1920). Secondly, her letters are a part of that social history itself; they are not simply a resource to be plundered for 'what they can show about the past', but form a fascinating topic of study in and of themselves. And lastly, Schreiner's letters provide a large and complex dataset for theorising letters and epistolarity.

Schreiner's epistolary life spanned a period of massive social change and momentous events, both in Britain and South Africa. As a young woman Schreiner lived for a time at the Diamond Fields in Kimberley and later on in Johannesburg on the brink of the 1899-1902 South African War, and in both places she was witness to the birth of a very particular type of

capitalism in Southern Africa, with all its attendant social and political consequences. Later, in the 1880s Schreiner was an important member of several literary and intellectual networks in London – she was part of the Men and Women’s Club, for example – and has been described as the archetypal ‘New Woman’. After her return to South Africa she went on to live through the South African War under martial law. She witnessed (and opposed) the Union of South Africa in 1910, and was crucially involved in the women’s suffrage movement in South Africa. After returning to Europe for health reasons at the end of 1913, she spent the First World War in London, where she was a key member of the pacifist movement. In sum Schreiner’s letters span the birth of modernity and are both a reflection of and on the processes and events which shaped that era.

Schreiner’s work engaged long-term with important questions concerning imperialism, capitalism, colonialism and ‘race’. She was focused on the three great questions of her time: the woman question, the ‘native’ question and the labour question. However, there has been little in-depth scholarly engagement with Schreiner’s letters, to the detriment of fuller understanding of her ideas on these questions and the high profile part she played in public political and intellectual life. Making Schreiner’s letters readily available for researchers will, we think, allow for a radical rethinking of Schreiner’s social theorising, as well as of her literary work. Her letters substantially enhance understanding of her analytical ideas and their responsiveness to changing political and social circumstances, and throw considerable light on how key aspects of her theorising emerged.

The Schreiner letters are also significant for they include correspondence with important figures in literary, political, as well as feminist and socialist, circles. The letters of many Schreiner correspondents (Sir Alfred Milner, Lord Kitchener, Herbert Gladstone, Gandhi,

Lloyd George, among others) are widely recognised as important source material. A tantalising sample of her correspondents includes Edward Carpenter, Mary Gladstone Drew, Havelock Ellis, Cecil Rhodes, Karl Pearson, Alys Pearsall-Smith, Jan Smuts and of course many others.

Analysis of the letters

In her work on letters and epistolarity Liz Stanley has developed the concept of the epistolarium, and using Schreiner's letters to build on and develop this set of ideas is a key part of the project. Analysis through the VRE will enable the structure as well as content of particular letters and the shape of the totality, the association between letters now extant and those known to have been destroyed, and the relationship of the text of letters to the contexts of their production, all to be explored in rigorous depth; and it is these features which add up to 'the epistolarium', exploration of which is crucial to the Project's research agenda. A recent project publication, for example, substantially enhances conceptualisation of the Schreiner epistolarium by examining networks across the race divide in South Africa in Schreiner's letters between 1890 and 1920.²

The project is also concerned with conceptualising letters and epistolarity more generally around ideas about 'the gift', epistolary transition zones and transitional forms, the shifting boundaries of 'letterness', counter-epistolaria, and also concerning editorship as a particular kind of archival activity involving both translation and transmutation of letters from one form to another. In addition, the project engages with Schreiner's letters and correspondences as one element within a wider set of overlapping epistolary networks, including by theorising the gift elements of these exchanges.

² See Stanley and Dampier 2010.

Preparing the letters for electronic publication

One of the reasons why Schreiner's letters have until now been a largely neglected resource concerns the logistical difficulties of accessing them. There are about 5000 letters located in 16 archives, across three continents. Another reason concerns Schreiner's notoriously difficult handwriting, and the logistics of handling such a large dataset.

There have been three editions of selected Schreiner letters published in the past, but these represent only a small fraction of the total extant, and each edition is problematic for different reasons.³ At least two have severely bowdlerised Schreiner's letters, and the other contains a specific and highly atypical collection of Schreiner letters.⁴

All members of the research team have been involved in transcribing the letters, mostly on site at the archives concerned, and occasionally from photocopies or photographs where these have been permitted. Project transcriptions stay as close to the originals as possible, representing all deletions, insertions, underlinings, mistakes and so on. Most of the letters were transcribed in MS Word and then either sent collection by collection to the technical team at the Humanities Research Institute (HRI) at Sheffield to be converted into XML, or the research team populated 'skeleton' XML files with the letters from MS Word versions. It is the XML letters which form the basis for what will appear on the user interface – that is, in HTML – and will also form the dataset for the VRE.

³ See Cronwright-Schreiner 1924, Draznin 1992 and Rive 1987.

⁴ Rive 1987 and Cronwright-Schreiner 1924 both contain shortened and problematically edited versions of Schreiner's letters, with numbers of errors. In addition, Rive's collection only includes letters up until 1899. Draznin's collection only concerns Schreiner's letters to Havelock Ellis archived at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.

The next stage involved checking every transcription and we took the decision to do this in MS Word and then transfer changes to the XML files, rather than check in XML which would have been an extremely time-consuming, given the complex range of ‘tags’ we need to make use of, as well as the ‘unfriendly’ user interface of the software concerned. The use of ‘track changes’ in MS Word enabled easy transfer of alterations to transcriptions onto the XML versions of files. The process of transcribing and multiply rechecking the letters has been complex, multi-layered and time consuming for the research team.

In addition, each letter is headed with a set of information or meta-data, recording the recipient’s name, the date the letter was written and the address it was written from, information about edited collections and archive referencing information. Alongside all this we have also worked up part of the editorial apparatus for the letters in the form of brief, simple notations, which do several important jobs of work. Firstly, they comment on any information from the meta-data which is not directly derived from Schreiner, such as the date. Secondly, they comment on any discrepancies between our version of the letter and versions which have appeared in one or the other of the edited collections of Schreiner letters. And lastly, they also provide bibliographical information for any Schreiner publications referred to in the letter, and bibliographical information for any other books or articles mentioned in the letter.

The Virtual Research Environment (VRE)

In preparing the funding application for the project, it became clear that none of the existing CAQDAS software packages on the market had the capabilities to manage such a large and internally diverse dataset as the Schreiner letters. The leading CAQDAS software packages now all offer a broadly similar range of facilities, although social science users deploy these

facilities in two rather different ways. Those working in an interpretivist and social constructionist way use them ‘horizontally’, as aids for project management, text searching and analytical reflection, while those working in a more positivist way use them ‘vertically’, to code data segments and built hierarchies of codes, in addition to project management tasks.

The OSLP’s methodological stance is interpretivist and social constructionist and will involve us working in a ‘horizontal’ way in analysing the Schreiner letters. We do not think coding everything in the letters is helpful because it foregrounds what researchers deem ‘important’ or ‘interesting’ before the letters themselves have been properly ‘worked through’ and thought about as a whole. The VRE that the technical team at HRI Sheffield is in the process of designing will enable us to stay close to the letters, working these ‘horizontally’ in an iterative way with analysis being cumulative and emergent, developing over time. It will combine working on the entire Schreiner letters, sub-sets of these, and also analysing specific letters and small numbers of letters through close detailed reading of them.

The search tool will be the basic tool for our analytic work and will involve being able to search across all the content of letters using words or phrases. That is, full text of the letters will be searchable, as per CAQDAS software, and also the various headings of the meta-data such as address, date and so on will be searchable. This will be combined with a range of other custom-designed, project-specific tools.

While the VRE and the ‘the Schreiner letters’ as published by HRI Sheffield are different and are to be kept separate, the Project will also provide workshops promoting a VRE-based project design for large-scale qualitative projects, for both project management purposes and

also the provision of a very high level of project-specific analytical tools, for social science and humanities researchers interested in developing project-specific data analysis tools.

In short, we envisage the OSLP revolutionising Schreiner scholarship in relation to aspects of South African history and indeed imperial history more generally, feminist scholarship, the theorisation of letters and epistolarity, and the use of software technologies in analysing large-scale qualitative datasets.

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